

VL SOCIAL LIFE

SEXUAL RELATIONS

COURTSHIP

There is a certain humor and quaintness of language used by Ngonga in describing sexual relations of the Ovimbundu. So far as possible the interpreter's style of expression has been preserved because of its value in revealing the native attitude. 584 836

When a man begins to like a girl, he looks at her for several days. Perhaps the boy will talk to the girl who will tell him to go to her father and mother. The boy must ask the parents for a friendship, which may last for one or two years. During this time the boy must not do anything to the girl, and if he tries she ought to tell her parents. If a baby were born to them in this time it would be a shameful thing. After the boy has told the parents that he wishes to marry the girl he must find something to give to them. The girl must have agreed to marriage before the boy asks the parents. The first token may be no more than a ball of wax or a present of salt. This token says, "The girl is mine," and no other boy will ask for her because it is understood that she is promised to somebody. In former days there were restrictions against marriage with other tribes, but in eastern Angola at the present day the Ovimbundu occasionally marry with the Vacholkue. [582]

Soon the boy will start building a house on his father's plot, because he intends to bring the girl to his father's land. The boy must at this stage make a further present to the parents of the girl. In the old days he would take about five kilos of salt; but now he will take a bottle of Portuguese wine, two or three blankets, or a piece of cloth. The people who carry the present must be the brother, father, or a male cousin of the suitor. These relatives will say, "This is the day we have come for our boy's wife." Then the parents will examine the things. Perhaps they will say, "You must bring a better blanket." The father or the girl's mother's brother must call the relatives of the girl to a council (*onjango*) where the relatives of the boy and girl are gathered. 584 481

The parents say, "We are taking these things for our daughter; we hope she will be a good girl and not shame us. She is a good girl to us and we hope she will be a good girl in your house." The girl's parents turn to her and say, "We should like to hear that you are hospitable; give food to your husband's relatives when they visit you." 584 577

584 you." There is no infant betrothal. There is not and never was any
[567] compulsion of a girl in marriage, but slave girls were disposed of in marriage by their masters.

832 A girl is not allowed to do anything to show that she loves a boy, for it would be a great shame for her to tell the boy that she loves him. Often a girl who prefers a boy will pretend that she does not like him.
[589] The Ovimbundu have a story which states that a man said, "I will bring my cow to the green grass"; he did so, but the cow would not eat. This expresses the idea that a boy would not like a girl who confessed a preference for him.

MARRIAGE

585 The prospective bride chooses one married woman and six unmarried girls to accompany her to the house prepared by her husband. Here a feast consisting of a pig and some chickens is provided by the husband for the relatives of both families. For three nights the girl returns to the house of her parents while the boy sleeps at his home. The married woman and six girls sleep at the house prepared by the bridegroom. During these days beer is provided by the boy's parents. The prospective husband is ironically addressed as *sandombua*. *Ndombua* means bridegroom, so is an abbreviation of *isia* meaning father. The term "father bridegroom" refers to the fact that the youth is a potential husband only; the marriage has not been consummated.

On the fourth day the bride brings her supply of domestic utensils. These are the cooking pots (*olombia*); the wooden spoons (*orito*); the brush of grass for sweeping (*olueyo*); some meal; also the pounder (*upi*). For the first month the wife is not allowed to cook in her own home; she cooks food in the home of her husband's parents and sends it to the council house (*onjango*) where her husband takes his meals with other men according to Umbundu custom. At the end of the first month of married life the mother of the husband invites any three old women who have been happily married to lay the hearth stones in the new home. Each of the old women brings a stone for the hearth. A chicken is killed and its blood is sprinkled on the hearth stones. While the young wife is preparing food at the new hearth, she is helped by the old women. If the girl is stirring with the big wooden spoon, one of the old women places her own hands over those of the girl. There is this kind of guidance in every action.

I understand that at the present day virginity in a bride is not so highly valued as in former days. The old custom was an examination

THE OVIMBUNDU UNDER TWO SOVEREIGNTIES

582 husband. Another explanation is that this is a northern practice which has spread into Gumba.⁹

584 A young man who wishes to marry approaches the girl of his choice and asks her to marry him. He then asks her parents for their permission. The consent of both partners and of their parents is required now as in the past, though parental consent may often be evaded by running off to the towns and getting married there. After that negotiations are conducted with a senior kinsman as intermediary. Before the marriage can take

583 place, bridewealth must be paid over. It is this that gives the right to claim damages for adultery. When asked why bridewealth is paid, informants are likely to say that it compensates the father for the expense of the bringing up of his daughter.

[178] The amount of bridewealth paid has been rising. Two informants said that four yards (metres) of cloth and a bottle of rum formed the bridewealth in the time of the rubber trade. Others suggested as the bridewealth of that period a hoe and a few sleeping-mats. Alternatively seashells or even Portuguese coins, which were not then used in transactions among the Ovimbundu, were employed. These bridewealth objects were obtained from outside Umbundu country and had a certain rarity value, unlike the other objects which were very common. In the early thirties Hastings also mentioned the bridewealth as consisting of four yards of cloth, a bottle of rum, plus a kerchief given to her father's sister.¹⁰ Money seems to have come in as a regular part of bridewealth about 1940.

When Cypriano married in 1949 Rosa, a sister's daughter, he paid 200 escudos (about £2. 10s.), a black cloth to her mother, and a small pig to her father. When Pedro Epalanga Chimbalanya married, near the Bimbe mission, in 1955 he paid 400 escudos, one cloth of six metres, a head cloth, a woman's blouse, and a bottle of rum. When in 1956 Daniel married Feliciana, a sister's daughter of Ndjoleya and his cross-cousin, he paid 400 escudos, whereas when Jose the son of Paulo married in the same year he paid 300 escudos also for a cross-cousin.

The bridewealth should be paid to the father. If however, a

⁹ Explanation given by Padre Felin.

¹⁰ Hastings, p. 93.